DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 214 850 SO 013 990

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TITLE Undisciplined Social Studies: An Analysis of NCSS Programs, 1976-1980.
PUB DATE Mar 82
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, March 19, 1982).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Conferences; *Definitions; *Educational Objectives; Educational Practices; Educational Research; Elementary Secondary Education; Problems; *Social Studies; State of the Art Reviews
IDENTIFIERS *National Council for the Social Studies

ABSTRACT

This study has two objectives: (1) to classify and analyze the content of the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) annual meetings for the last five years; and (2) to suggest implications of the findings within the context of historical definitions, contemporary problems, and long-range goals and objectives of the social studies. Data are the content of the sessions of the annual meetings of NCSS for the years 1976-1980 as published in meeting programs. In the analysis of the data, three major components were identified and studied: content area, primary objective of each session, and presence of a research base. Conclusions follow. As evidenced by professional practice, social studies is very broad and not systematically organized even within specific content areas. Social studies as practiced is only tenuously related to the traditional academic disciplines that the public presumes to be social studies. Social studies is predominately concerned with contemporary social problems; it is a reactive profession. There is little evidence of organized attempts to find definitive answers to persistent problems. Professional practice, particularly as it relates to classroom practices, has a very thin research base. (Author/RM)

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Undisciplined Social Studies:
An Analysis of NCSS Programs, 1976-1980

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Presented at American Educational Research Association,
New York, March, 1982

SP 013 990

Definition of the social studies has been of substantial concern throughout its history (Barr, Barth, and Shermis, 1977). The profession has been unable to agree upon appropriate social studies content, goals and objectives, and procedures for instruction. Wide gulfs within the profession have been created by failure to agree upon the very nature of the discipline (Mehlinger, 1981). Shaver, Davis, and Helburn (1979) also noted differences between what is advocated by social studies leaders and what is practiced in classrooms, and reiterated long-standing concern for the inadequate research base for social studies. Social studies allegedly is ill-defined not simply in its programs in the lower schools; it also is said to be ill-defined as a profession and a discipline.

Shaver (1967) recognized a need for greater unity of purpose in the social studies. Barth and Shermis (1970) went beyond Shaver's emphasis on citizenship education as the desired redefinition to an exploration of three basic traditions in the social studies, an exploration later expanded and elaborated (Barr, Barth, and Shemis, 1977). Meanwhile, the social studies in school declined in emphasis (Gross, 1977) to the point that Nelson (1980) reported a sense of hopelessness among some social studies educators that the field could even be justified as a school subject. There are limitations to the conventional history of the social studies (Robinson, 1980) that may have led us to be overly optimistic about the value of social studies and the need to justify the field to the public.

Not only have there been widely divergent views about the nature of the social studies in past and disagreements about current appropriate emphases, there is little agreement about directions to take in future. Social studies educators who contributed twelve articles on social studies goals for the next two decades were widely divergent in their recommendations (Berryman, 1980).

Morrissett (1979) has contended that divergence is not undesirable, that social studies is a broad field that can accomodate disparate goals and functions. But a major function of a discipline is to define and order knowledge. With that function accomplished, it becomes possible to conduct systematic research to gain knowledge and then apply it to solutions of human problems. In the social studies we have been unable to accomplish that first function to the point that systematic research progress has been possible.

There has been some progress. The existence of this social studies interest group in AERA, the creation of CUFA in NCSS, and the vastly superior research training provided in our field today as compared with that available in my generation is evidence of both concern and progress. We are on our way. We cannot, however, agree upon where we should be going, we continue debate over where we have been, and we are even uncertain of where we are at present.

One potentially useful way of defining a discipline is to empirically determine what its leaders say it is by observing their professional practice. National Council for the Social Studies is the recognized professional organization in our field. Its annual meeting is the single largest outlet in number of professional activities each year. Presenters at annual meeting sessions are <u>de facto</u> leaders of the profession, conferred with leadership by the selection processes of program committees. The content of annual meetings is one important measure for a definition of the social studies. Presenters represent a broader base than authors of texts, journal articles, and other written commentaries that command a national audience. The lead time between preparation and presentation is relatively brief. Because presenters include classroom teachers, the gulf between the theoretical and the practical may be narrower than in other possible measures of the

social studies.

Determining what social studies is by examining actual practice will not be sufficient in itself. The present status of a business often is reviewed weekly; defining its current status is a necessary first step in making judgments about replenishing inventories or scheduling production. It is the quality of those judgments that will determine future success, however. Gaining more qualitative information about current professional practice in social studies gives some promise of being useful, but the quality of subsquent judgments will count more heavily in the future of the profession.

This study has two objectives. One is to classify and analyze one aspect of professional activity in social studies, the content of NCSS annual meetings during the most recent five years. The second objective is to suggest implications of the findings within the context of historical definitions, contemporary problems, and long range goals and objectives of the social studies.

Data are the content of sessions of the annual meetings of NCSS for the years 1976-1980 as publishing in meeting programs (NCSS, 1976-1980). Committee meetings and SIG meetings with only business sessions were omitted. These data are limited to titles, brief descriptions, authors and their affiliations, and in some years the audience for whom intended. A more thorough analysis might have been attained from session proposals had they been available or from attending each session had that been possible. It was assumed that the data available accurately represented the sessions as offered. That is not always true of NCSS or other professional meetings.

A classification scheme was devised, tested, and revised. Three major components were identified. The first was content area. Examples

are global education, ethnic studies, the teaching of skills, and teacher education. Included were professional and policy interest, indirectly and directly related to teaching in the schools. An example of an indirect professional interest is a study of attitudes of public school children toward social studies. Findings affect professional practice, but are not directly related to instruction. A professional interest directed related to teaching and schools is exemplified by policy strategies to increase use of the computer by students in social studies classes. While examples of instruction might have been included, the emphasis was on policy rather than how-to-do-it. These two categories were relatively diverse as compared with somewhat greater unity of others. Only 48 sessions in the five year period did not fit into the 23 categories that were established. Sessions were assigned to the one category in which they fit best as to precision of content description. For example, a session on attitudes toward sex roles was classified under "sexism" rather than the broader category of values education.

All classifications were completed by the author. Two tests for consistency of classification were made. Three judges considered to be knowledgeable about social studies were given the classification criteria including examples and 25 randomly selected descriptions. Of the resulting 75 content classifications, 74 coincided with the prior classification by the author. Five months after the original classification, the author reclassified all sessions for one annual meeting. Only 2 sessions were classified differently as to content. The classification scheme for content was judged to be acceptably stable.

A second component of the classification was the primary objective of each session. Dissemination of knowledge, curriculum diffusion, teaching

methods, and materials use were the only categories established. Attempts to classify more precisely the objectives of sessions were unsuccessful. Examples of the curriculum/materials distinction are project materials intended for wider use as compared with teacher developed materials presented more as example than for adoption. Table sessions, begun in 1978, are not described in programs other than by title, could not be classified by objective, and are reported as a separate category simply as table sessions. Judges concurred with the author in 72 of the 75 cases sampled; the author was inconsistent in 4 cases when reclassifying all sessions in a single year. Inconsistencies were among sessions including both methods and materials where judgment varied as to which objective predominated. Classification by only four session objectives was stable and consistent but was judged to provide less useful information than was desirable.

Finally, sessions were classified as to reported presence of a research base. Inclusion of a paper in a CUFA session "research roundtable" was assumed to indicate a research base regardless of the title. As a measure of the actual research base, the analysis undoubtedly is somewhat inaccurate. From personal knowledge, the author could identify a few sessions, usually in the CUFA section of the program, that actually included reports of research but that were not so described in the program. Using the conservative criterion of reported presence, judges were highly accurate, but they also could identify some sessions that actually included research reports. But it was equally clear from descriptions that many sessions, even CUFA sessions, were not research based.

One would expect, at a professional meeting, that most sessions except perhaps those concerned with professional policy interests should be research related. As compared with the normal expectations for a

discipline, the research base inadequacy became apparent during the process of attempting to devise a classification scheme. It is contended that reported presence of a research base is a useful criterion since it indicates a measure of the perceived importance of research in our discipline of both presenters and program committees.

Session content categories and the frequency of sessions in each are listed in Table 1. Several generalizations appear to be warranted. First, the nature of the social studies was dominated by contemporary social problems and issues. Global education sessions concentrated primarily on present concerns. Citizenship education focused on participation, most often by using contemporary issues which were defined as worthy of the attention of citizens. Law related education, ethnic studies, sexism, and environment education were other examples of content topics that centered on the contemporary scene. Emphasis on a unifying disciplinary structure was rarely apparent although perhaps not necessarily absent. As an aside, let me note that my high school government class in 1945-46 was devoted almost entirely to the study of the United Nations. Presentism in social studies is not a recent phenonmenon.

(See Table 1)

A second factor shown to influence the content of professional practice was funding, direct or indirect, of particular content. Citizenship, law related, and economic education are examples of the apparent effects of direct funding on frequency of conference sessions. In contrast, geography and the behavioral sciences received little attention. In global education, the effect of sponsored travel for teachers and other educators appeared to be substantial. Nations that have supported travel often have

been rewarded with conference sessions regarding those nations. Funding agencies have been successful in influencing the content of professional practice in social studies. The long range effects often diminished rapidly when funding ended, however.

A third major characteristic that provided better understanding of the social studies was eclecticism. Even within content categories, often there was lack of a systematic effort to generate knowledge to solve problems. In the vernacular, many participants "did their own thing." More systematic approaches, continuing efforts, and building on prior research were somewhat more apparent in CUFA sessions than others. But epitomized by the sessions on teaching a specific topic, lack of grounding in systematic theory was implicit in program descriptions throughout the five annual meetings.

Except for approximately 75% of citizenship education sessions that were concentrated in two years, conference themes had no discernable impact on session content. The discipline within the profession for program committees to "enforce" the social studies equivalent of the recent health profession's decision to eliminate measles did not appear to be present. That may, of course, be a consequence of inattention to systematic research in past.

Except in community studies, program descriptions gave little attention to research methodology as content for students in the lower schools. The scope of this study did not permit comparison of the present emphasis on methodology of disciplines with that of a decade ago. Some attention to analytic skills was given in sessions classified as teaching of skills, but nearly half of skills sessions were devoted to those skills traditionally assigned to the primary schools.

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The major objectives of sessions are reported in Table 2. Attempts to develop a more precise set of categories of objectives were unsuccessful in that reliability was lacking. Results do suggest the dichotomy within the profession of those whose interests lie in the day-to-day conduct of classes and supervisors and college faculty who have broader interests. The methods and the materials sessions appeared to focus on short-term, in-class practical interests of classroom teachers. Curriculum and many knowledge dispensing sessions were more theoretical and perhaps were aimed at other than teachers. Classifying objectives by session content category produced a maze of tabular data that added little to the analysis, and are omitted here. Results support the presumption that there is a gulf within the profession between theory and practice. In hindsight, the nature of this gulf might have been better demonstrated by conducting interviews at the Detroit airport at the midpoint of the 1981 conference as supervisors and college faculty departed in large numbers while classroom teachers were arriving.

(See Table 2)

Table 3 includes the frequency of the reported presence of a research base by content areas. Overall, the frequency was judged to be very low. Frequency by session content showed the tendency for research-based sessions to be aimed at college faculty. Sessions concerned primarily with classroom practice very rarely had a reported research base. More sessions than reported may have been based in research, but failure to make that explicit may have reflected the nature of the profession. Lack of research in social studies has been long lamented; this study confirms with specific data that validity of those concerns.

(See Table 3)

In summary, these conclusions seem warranted:

1. As evidenced by professional practice, social studies is very broad and not systematically organized even within specific content areas.
2. Social studies as practiced is only tenuously related to the traditional academic disciplines that the public presumes to be social studies.
3. Social studies is predominately concerned with contemporary social problems; it is a reactive profession.
4. There is little evidence of organized attempts to find definitive answers to persistent problems.
5. Professional practice, particularly as it relates to classroom practices, has a very thin research base.

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TABLE 1

FREQUENCY OF NCSS CONFERENCE

PROGRAM CONTENT AREAS, 1976-1980

1.	Global Education	134
2.	Citizenship Education	132
3.	Teaching of Skills	127
4.	Professional Interests (Non-instructional)	127
5.	Curriculum Development	91
6.	Teacher Education	87
7.	Teaching Single Topics or Concepts	81
8.	Ethnic Studies	78
9.	Law Related Education	68
10.	Economic Education	67
11.	Professional Interests (Instructional)	67
12.	History Education	55
13.	Interdisciplinary Studies	51
14.	Community Studies	50
15.	Environmental Education	44
16.	Values Education	40
17.	Sexism	37
18.	Other Social Sciences Disciplines	29
19.	Audio-visual and Equipment Use	24
20.	Future Studies	17
21.	Mainstreaming	16
22.	Urban Studies	12
23.	Science and Society	9
24.	Others	48

TABLE 2

FREQUENCY OF OBJECTIVES OF NCSS

CONFERENCE SESSIONS, 1976-1980

Providing Knowledge or Information	608	40.8%
Diffusing Curriculum	237	15.9%
Demonstrating Teaching Materials	154	10.3%
Demonstrating Teaching Methods	372	24.9%
Table Sessions*	120	8.0%

* Offered only 1978-80. Insufficient information provided to classify more precisely.

TABLE 3

RESEARCH BASED SESSIONS OF NCSS

CONFERENCE SESSIONS, 1976-1980

	TOTAL	RESEARCH	% RESEARCH
Professional Interests (Instructional)	67	33	34.3
Teacher Education	87	26	29.9
Professional Interests (Non-instructional)	127	36	28.3
Sexism	37	8	21.6
Citizenship Education	132	14	10.6
Curriculum Development	91	8	8.8
All other sessions	950	47	4.9